

# Promoting Effective Professional Development: in English Language Teaching (ELT)

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*By Liz England*

This article is an effort to address the increasingly critical need for accountability in English language teacher preparation. The ELT profession has fallen short in recent years and will continue to do so in the future without better coordination of professional development in both academic preservice settings and in ELT program inservice settings. A framework for accomplishing this is presented here. By viewing professional development as a coordinated effort and a lifelong process from the first days in a teacher education program and extending throughout one's career, we can look forward to more accountability with better instructional results, higher morale and better working conditions.

Professional development in English language teaching is critical for at least five reasons:

1. The role of English in the world has grown so much that there are reportedly more than four times as many nonnative speakers as native speakers of English (Strevens 1980). The spread of English requires many more instructors. Those who teach English need to be able to manage a much broader range of teaching responsibilities and increasingly diverse learner needs.
2. We know much more today about language learning and language teaching than we ever did before. In the past several years, we have expanded our view of language teaching to focus on communicative competence. Earlier, we took a more narrow view of ELT: providing students with knowledge about the language (Brown 1994).

Over the past 30 years, work in several disciplines such as linguistics, education, psychology, and anthropology has yielded a body of research on the teaching and learning of new languages. We know more about second language acquisition and the myriad factors that influence it. We understand more about the intersection between teaching and learning, the classroom experience, and the value of the communication that goes on there (Cazden 1988; Crookes and Chaudron 1991).

3. Training paradigms in academic and professional circles are changing: lines between academic and professional preparation are fading. Today, academic work in almost all fields of study is increasingly linked with real-world professional experience. ELT is no exception (Richards and Lockhart 1994). Although course work is a critical part of professional preparation, new graduates are in for a shock in the world of ELT if they have not been prepared with more than traditional academic course work. Many MA and certificate programs have added components of practical, real-world training in an effort to better prepare teachers for success following their academic programs.

4. Effective English language teachers are obliged to look carefully at their professional development in order to improve their experiences in classrooms and to minimize burnout. The vast majority of teachers are self-directed and want to understand the complexity of their task and that of their students. As educators of others, teachers intrinsically want and need to participate in ongoing development and change in their own professional lives. Teachers need to be supported in their efforts. Too many good teachers have become worn down and ineffective as a result of unimproved, traditional teaching assignments that characterized earlier ELT.

5. ELT programs benefit from teachers who are current with the field. Program directors need to guide teachers in setting goals for professional improvement and support the teachers in meeting those goals. Teachers should be provided time for inservice meetings to address their needs beyond the administrative lectures and data-reporting sessions. In such meetings teachers might present ideas on a new technique or a summary of an article on a topic of interest and relevance to the group. In addition, teachers should be encouraged to participate in one or more of the many projects that teacher educators use: journals, peer observation and analysis of classes, paired research activities, and self-study. Teachers should also be encouraged to present at local, regional, and international meetings and conferences. Such encouragement could take the form of rewards such as promotion and support for travel to conferences, as well as symbolic rewards at staff meetings and dinners.

By learning and changing, administrators and teachers are investing in their programs and the benefits are significant. The long- and short-term benefits of carefully designed professional inservice training are at the core of a quality ELT program (Christison and Stoller 1997). For teachers, these include increased instructional effectiveness, high morale, and job satisfaction. For students, the benefits include student satisfaction and effective, enjoyable learning. For program managers, the benefits include teacher and student retention.

It is no secret that English language teaching is a profession that has moved in new directions over the past 30 years. This has meant heavier pressure and more interesting work for teachers and students. As the profession has evolved, our focus has broadened. An emphasis on a more analytical approach to learners' communication needs (long- and short-term) and preferred learning styles translates into more interactive and dynamic classroom experiences. Roles of teachers and students alike have evolved into partnerships in the learning process. Changing roles means that teachers need more opportunities for continuing their education on the job. Meeting learner needs in the classroom means meeting teacher needs to be prepared for the classroom.

## **The Employment Problem**

Even with a broadened definition of what ELT professionals do, the ELT profession continues to suffer from "an image problem." In many parts of the world, we are still not taken seriously. Too many employers still believe that if someone speaks English without a strong accent, that person can teach it. In many cases, in the United States and elsewhere, there is no way to prevent an employer from hiring someone for an ELT position who does not have the education or training

"equivalent to" the certificate or master's degree in TESL/TEFL. This reality of our profession creates significant problems, both professional and managerial. Would you go to a cardiologist with "equivalent" training?

As a result of these hiring practices, trained ELT professionals have not always been successful in finding and keeping good jobs. It is unfortunate that there are positions appropriate for ELT professionals that go to those without ELT training. Examples of this practice are found less in recent years in U.S. primary and secondary schools (K-12) where local, state, and national accreditation standards have been put into place. These standards require teachers to have discipline-specific ELT preparation. However, other jobs continue to be filled by underprepared, or in some cases unprepared teachers. These are often positions in ESP (English for specific purposes), program administration, and high-level management.

Because effective learning will occur best in classrooms and programs where instruction is of high quality, professional preparation in ELT is of critical and timely concern to teachers and to management in the academic, public and private sectors.

## **ELT Professional Development for the Twenty-first Century**

In order for ELT professionals to be effective on the job and obtain full-time employment, there is a need for coordinated and structured teacher preparation. Academic staff in preservice preparation programs around the world need to join hands with their colleagues who are managing ELT programs to create a coordinated effort for preservice and inservice professional development. Employers must be required to hire qualified professionals and show evidence of efforts to maintain teaching standards.

Academic programs, mostly MA TESOL and certificate programs, do a good job of developing knowledge, skills, and habits in teachers (Freeman 1982). These almost always include the use of self-assessment, peer learning, and positive attitudes toward professional growth and change. When an English language program director hires a new teacher, whether newly graduated or experienced, the manager should not feel comfortable simply handing the teacher the employee handbook, the personnel forms, an orientation to the program and staff, and introduction to the curriculum, textbooks, and equipment. We are overdue in providing teachers what they need most as they take jobs that require more efficient use of linguistic knowledge and more flexibility, and in which the stakes are higher. Teachers need and deserve carefully designed inservice training programs. These programs should be designed to support teachers' efforts to provide effective instruction to meet increasingly demanding and complex learner needs.

Directors of ELT programs have a right to expect professionally prepared teachers to arrive on their first day of class ready to work with students in ways that are effective, efficient, and appropriate to the learners' needs. Academic preparation programs need to work more closely than they have in the past to be informed about the demands of the ELT work- place and the changing pedagogical needs of diverse learner groups in a variety of learning contexts. This is true for intensive and non-intensive academic or independent EFL/ESL/ ESP programs, workplace-based ESP contexts, adult literacy programs, and public school classrooms. Academic

teacher preparation programs should be more in touch than in the past with what is going on in ELT programs. Academic preparation program faculty should be working to focus course work more in line with what teachers need and less in line with what academic institutional traditions might dictate.

## **Who Has to Change and How?**

The following section describes a proposal to change how we view teacher preparation, with an emphasis on coordination of English language teachers' professional development.

There are three parts to this proposal identifying changes needed: first, in preservice, academic teacher education programs; second, in inservice, ELT programs; and finally, a description of specific strategies for coordinating preservice and inservice professional development.

### ***Preservice teacher education***

What is professional preparation in our field? There is no equivalent to the MA or certificate in teaching English to speakers of other languages. MA TESOL and TEFL certificate programs offer teachers tailored, highly specialized knowledge in language and linguistics, TESOL methodology and testing, practice teaching, and a variety of other areas depending on the program. Teachers are prepared with the knowledge base. ELT is a professional subspecialty. It has a canon. It has a research base. It is not the same as teaching literature. It is not the same as teaching any other subject: math, science, driver's education, or music. ELT is highly complex. It is a professionally and personally demanding and rewarding job. Most MA TESOL and TEFL certificate holders leave their programs with the necessary knowledge base.

In addition to knowledge, preservice programs prepare teachers with a variety of techniques and strategies for acculturating into their profession. Teachers are often also expected to present papers or demonstrations at local, regional, and international conferences. Many preservice programs even expect teachers to work on conference planning teams locally. Teachers are taught how to be colleagues, to apply their knowledge about language and language teaching to the real world of the classroom. Teachers arrive at their new jobs with the necessary knowledge and professional identity needed to do a good job.

Too many programs, however, do not prepare teachers fully for ELT work. There may be few opportunities for teachers in these programs to build skills to lead or supervise teachers and other staff; to build a tailored, needs-based curriculum for a special program; or to interact with colleagues in other departments on shared student or instructional issues. Teachers may never have had the opportunity to build skills to advocate for a budget increase.

Preservice preparation program faculty may not always be in close contact with those who hire their graduates. Contact with prospective employers may not be done easily and frequently. In most cases, those contacts simply don't happen at all. Therefore, the effective assimilation of a new teacher into a specific ELT program depends on that program's inservice and professional development program.

### ***Inservice teacher education and accountability***

An inservice training program is an opportunity for teachers and program directors to draw on the strengths, training, and experience of teachers and to develop teachers' skills in an English language teaching program. An inservice training program provides the environment for teachers to gain an identity as individual professionals, to work as part of a team of colleagues (both in the program and beyond), and to develop rapport and effective communication with the supervisor (the curriculum director or program director, in most programs). Many MA TESOL or TEFL certificate holders take their first jobs with great enthusiasm, eagerness, and an open mind toward inservice professional development and self-direction. Some teachers want to learn and improve their teaching skills on the job. Many do not, or cannot. Some teachers have no difficulty assimilating to the work environment. Others do. All teachers deserve inservice professional development.

Program directors have a right to expect that teachers arrive at the doors of their programs with the requisite knowledge and skills to teach, to be collegial, and to support the work of the program. Opportunities and benefits for those teachers who do have those knowledge and skills are significant. But program directors must build on those teachers' professional training and support them with a carefully designed inservice professional development program that draws on and builds the knowledge and skills of teachers hired. What should an inservice training program include and how does a program director implement it?

### ***Developing an inservice training program***

An inservice training program should include opportunities for learning and for sharing ideas: on one's own, with colleagues, and with a supervisor. The inservice program should contain a core set of requirements with a list of elective options selected by the teacher. The program plan should be written by the teacher in cooperation with the curriculum director and program director. It should contain opportunities for brainstorming, planning, and sharing ideas; identifying ways of meeting the needs of a specific student or group; and building on individual teacher strengths. The inservice training program should include elements of self-assessment, peer feedback, and supervisor feedback. It should include student feedback as well. And finally, it should include records and evidence of the teacher's instructional effectiveness, scholarly and/or creative activity, and professional service. These are areas familiar to most academically prepared teachers from their preservice experience. Weightings for these three elements or other parts of the inservice program can be used as part of the teacher evaluation program. However, it should be stressed that an inservice training program does not take the place of a teacher evaluation. They are different activities and serve different functions.

Program directors should preview the inservice program with candidates for new positions during the hiring process. Some teachers may not be willing to participate in such a program. All prospective teachers should be informed of the inservice program prior to hiring.

For those teachers lacking adequate preparation and training, the program director is often required to do the necessary catch-up for what is missing in preservice preparation. Effective program directors assume that responsibility. Others shirk it by blaming the teacher for inadequate performance, applying punitive measures, or simply ignoring the problem.

The real world of managing an EFL/ESL program demands accountability from teachers. Performance evaluation in most programs requires teachers to demonstrate their efforts to improve. Too often, teachers are unable to demonstrate this accountability. Program directors often do not support teachers' efforts to be accountable. The guidelines presented above will help those who wish to change. There are, however, staffing shortages in many places that make it difficult to find qualified, professionally prepared teachers. Inservice training is more difficult but not impossible under these conditions. The degree of teacher preparation is always a consideration when building effective inservice training programs.

### ***Working with semitrained or untrained teachers***

In some parts of the world, there is a shortage of ELT professionals, and programs are forced to hire semitrained or untrained teachers. In those cases, how does a program director handle staffing and professional development? Here are some guidelines found in some programs. Most important, the program director should balance staffing. Many programs place the most well-qualified teachers in the most critical positions, while less qualified teachers take other positions. This provides a balance and indeed a support system for all. For example, professionally prepared teachers are assigned the permanent, full-time positions. These often carry administrative and/or supervisory responsibilities. Less qualified staff are assigned temporary, part-time (sometimes hourly) positions. Sometimes, these guidelines are adjusted to accommodate individual teacher strengths. For example, a less qualified, temporary teacher is enrolled in an MA TESOL program. That teacher may be able to assume a higher position. Or in another program, a teacher is very popular with students but is untrained. That teacher might teach a group of students who have another class with a trained teacher. That untrained teacher might also be encouraged to enroll in a part-time or in a full-time certificate or MA program to be considered for a permanent position. Certainly in the case where there are professionally trained and experienced teachers working alongside undertrained or untrained teachers, the content of the inservice program needs to be balanced in a way to meet the needs of both.

### ***Benefits of a good inservice program***

In addition to helping teachers, inservice teacher education has direct and immediate positive effects on overall program morale and particularly student satisfaction. Teachers who are involved in an ongoing effort to build their professional skills are happier, more invested in their teaching, and more committed to the students and to the program than teachers who have no inservice program. Students who attend classes taught by teachers who are involved in ongoing discussions, brainstorming, and sharing about ways of improving classes are more satisfied than students who are in programs where teachers are not provided with such support.

Inservice training can be a powerful ally to a program director who wants to head off problems with student dissatisfaction and sponsor complaints. By providing teachers with opportunities to explore needs of a given student, student group, or sponsor, much can be achieved toward avoiding catastrophe. These opportunities can yield highly effective alternatives to what might have been the early departure of a student or the resignation of a teacher. In addition, teacher frustration caused by lack of preparation or knowledge about students and their needs is also minimized by inservice teacher education. Student satisfaction is maximized in the English language program in which teachers are prepared to meet the needs of their students.

## **Preservice and Inservice Teacher Education are Natural Partners in ELT Professional Development**

In order to achieve this coordination of preservice academic preparation and inservice training in program settings, several steps can be taken and are already in place in some cases.

*ELT academic preparation programs* : Faculty should require projects, portfolios, and other work from MA and certificate program students in order to prepare them for the real world. Portfolio and individual, paired, or group projects might include the following: needs assessments, language audits, curriculum and materials design, administrative tools for managing ELT programs (such as evaluations and standard operating procedures), tests (for a variety of language skills using tasks and other useful measures), and research projects designed to address issues facing the real world of ELT in a part of the world of interest and relevant to the candidate. MA or certificate program content should be tailored to meet the needs of those who enroll in the program. At the minimum, the following courses are necessary for all graduate ELT preservice training programs:

- observation and analysis of ESL/EFL classrooms (a variety of age levels and learner needs should be included),
- basic linguistic knowledge: phonology, syntax and discourse,
- cross-cultural communication,
- methods and materials,
- English for Specific Purposes (including EOP),
- program administration/program management,
- testing,
- principles of language teaching,
- practicum (one semester minimum).

*ELT employment settings* : Program managers and employers must work with teachers, both new and experienced, to design a professional development policy and program that reflects the needs of the institution and includes evidence and documentation for improvement and plans for the future. Evaluation (individual, peer, and supervisor) and support should accompany this plan at all levels. In addition, program managers should encourage brainstorming, cooperation, and sharing of ideas and materials both within the program and in the form of conference presentations and professional exposure. Finally, program managers need to address morale and burnout issues through carefully developed inservice programs. The message must be this: The need for inservice training does not diminish but enhances a person's professional standing in the program and in the profession.

*ELT professional associations* : More support for academic and employment-based professional development is needed by the profession from the associations that represent our interests. Accreditation standards are underway from TESOL, IATEFL, the British Council, and their affiliates offer regular inservice opportunities for those who wish to participate. Academic institutions need to support the efforts of the professional associations by recognizing them and developing course offerings in preservice settings that meet the professional associations'

guidelines. Employers of ELT professionals need to establish clear and thorough guidelines for ongoing coordinated preservice and inservice professional development and growth for teachers. This might be done under the auspices of a professional association as well.

## **Conclusion: An Urgent Call for Action**

Until ELT professionals are provided with coordinated support in their efforts to keep apace and maintain high standards, we will not be able to achieve accountability and do an effective job. No academic preparation program will be able to promise its graduates success and satisfaction in the ELT work force.

Employers must begin to coordinate with preparation programs in order to provide a continuing education experience for good teachers if they wish to keep them. In the twenty-first century, good teachers will want to work for those ELT programs in which professional development is offered in place of the alternative, burnout. Until a coordinated teacher preparation model is put into place, we will continue to struggle with our "image problem."

ELT professional associations must provide clear and enforceable guidelines for academic and employment settings in order to support the positive efforts of both in coordinated professional development. In the absence of the "teeth" to support and enforce positive coordination, such efforts will go unrecognized and unheeded.

The real-world communication problems of the twenty-first century are already upon us. We know that successful international communication will be more critical than ever. Global concerns and complex problems will be addressed more effectively by people who can speak and write clearly to one another. In more cases than not, that communication will take place in English. English teachers will become more critical and more accountable than ever before in their role in providing the necessary skills for addressing those challenges. The teachers' ability to do their job depends upon the people who prepare them for the ELT profession. Universities can no longer be held totally responsible for that work since preservice ELT preparation is only half the battle, as this article describes. More and more, ELT employers will also have to provide professional development through inservice training. ELT professional associations need to provide the necessary support for positive efforts to coordinate preservice and inservice ELT preparation.

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